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DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS

NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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SUBJECT: Peace process update: Detainees go on hunger strike; Tensions in east; Tamil Tiger radio

Refs: Colombo 1858, and previous

(U) Classified by W. Lewis Amselem, Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b, d).

[1](#)1. (C) This update of Sri Lanka's peace process reviews the following:

-- Demanding immediate release, Tamil detainees go on hunger strike

-- Amid strong hints that a resolution may be near, standoff involving captured soldiers continues

-- Tigers reportedly attack office of pro-government Tamil party

-- Continuing cyclical trend, Muslims in east said to be riled over what they consider their marginalization

-- The flavor of the peace process: After years of clandestine operations, "Voice of the Tigers" radio said to want official frequency

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Detainees go on Hunger Strike  
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[1](#)2. (U) About 150 Tamil detainees with suspected ties to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have been on a hunger strike since October 1. The detainees are demanding their immediate release from jails in Kalutara (south of Colombo) and Batticaloa in the east. The prisoners assert that the law they are being held under, the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), is unfair and should be repealed.

[1](#)3. (C) The situation is becoming a bit of a cause celebre. Various GSL ministers have been streaming to the jail to urge the prisoners to break their fast. Under pressure from the government, the Attorney General's office has also announced that it will see what it can do to obtain early releases for some of those detained. (Note: The AG's office has already taken steps that have resulted in the release of hundreds of PTA suspects this year. Many of those currently detained are reportedly hard-core LTTE operatives, who were engaged in clear-cut terrorist-related activities.) Tamil politicians are also turning up the heat and are scheduled to visit Kalutara today to check on the detainees' health. (Note: Most of the detainees seem to be in good health, but some are reportedly growing quite weak.) Supporting the strikers, G.G. Ponnambalam, a senior Tamil National Alliance MP, told us that the government must "remove the PTA" because it is "contrary to all humanitarian law."

[1](#)4. (C) Comment: The detainees have chosen a clever tactic: Perhaps because of Mahatma Gandhi's regional legacy, hunger strikes -- despite a ritualistic quality -- spark sympathy in Sri Lanka. That said, our guess is that the uproar over this issue is LTTE-generated to a large extent. The following sequence of events is almost certainly more than a coincidence: The LTTE delegates at the recent peace talks in Thailand raise the PTA issue with the GSL team, but to no avail. Two weeks later the detainees begin a hunger strike, which is publicly (and loudly) supported by pro-LTTE Tamil politicians. End Comment.

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Standoff May Be Resolved Soon  
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[1](#)5. (SBU) Amid some positive noises that a resolution may be very near, the standoff over the LTTE's detention of six Sri Lankan soldiers continues. (Note: The soldiers have been held by the LTTE since their September 25 capture in Trincomalee District. One other

soldier was released last week on humanitarian grounds.) Despite vigorous entreaties from the GSL and the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), the LTTE has refused to release the soldiers until two of its own cadre are released in a de facto exchange. Extensive pressure has been put on the GSL to take steps against the LTTE and force the group to resolve the dispute (see Reftel). Choosing a softer approach, the GSL arranged a bail hearing for the two LTTE cadre on October 7. The SLMM told us that the incident may be resolved as early as later today. (Note: Mission has received late word that the LTTE cadre were released early October 9 after obtaining bail and that the soldiers' release also may be imminent.)

16. (C) Comment: The government's first priority throughout this incident has been to defuse it as quickly as possible so that it did not prove disruptive for the peace process. With the LTTE playing unrelenting hard ball, that strategy has not been totally successful. In playing this game, the LTTE may reap a short-term gain by obtaining the release of its cadre. In the longer term, however, the group has dented its image as a cooperative partner in the peace process -- and made the GSL look weak in the process. End Comment.

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Tigers Reportedly Attack Party Office  
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17. (SBU) LTTE operatives are being accused of attacking the office of a pro-government Tamil party on October 5. The incident reportedly involved an attack by a group of lightly armed men on an office of the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) on Delft Island off the coast of Jaffna. Several people were lightly injured in the melee and there was some damage to the EPDP's office. The EPDP, which has also claimed that one of its party members was briefly abducted, has placed blame on the Tigers, asserting that the attack was led by a LTTE operative named "Carter." (Note: This is another interesting LTTE nom de guerre, following along the lines of other cadre we have heard of with White House-flavored names like "Kennedy" and "Reagan." We are not sure what the gag is here, but it is apparently amusing to the LTTE. End Note.) For its part, the LTTE has denied involvement. The SLMM is investigating the incident.

18. (C) Comment: The EPDP acted as a pro-government paramilitary organization for years before it agreed to disarm earlier this year. (Note: Along with several other Tamil paramilitary groups, the EPDP did turn in some of its weapons. It is said to have retained some, however.) The group, which has been largely pro-peace process in its public utterances, has long maintained strength in the islands off Jaffna. The LTTE has been actively challenging the EPDP's political control of the islands and it would not be surprising if it was indeed behind the Delft attack. End Comment.

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Tensions in East  
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19. (C) Mission has picked up numerous recent reports that Muslims in the east are again very upset over the peace process. The active ingredient in the latest uptick in tensions involves recent comments by Rauf Hakeem, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) leader and GSL Minister. In a statement in late September, Hakeem, who was a member of the GSL's negotiating team during the recent Thailand talks, said he did not see the need for Muslims in the east to have a separate governing council in any interim administration formed for the region. These comments were explosive in the east and many eastern Muslim leaders denounced Hakeem. Jehan Perera of the National Peace Council, a local think-tank, told us that Hakeem's comments were "ill-advised," as they signaled to eastern Muslims that they were a "marginalized group."

10. (C) Comment: The tensions among Muslims in the east are cyclical and Hakeem's remarks clearly provoked anger after several months of relative calm. It is not clear why Hakeem made his remarks, as it is widely agreed that the best path at this time is for both the GSL and LTTE to avoid discussion of "big picture" structural issues. Hakeem, who is not from the east, also did himself a disservice by reinforcing among eastern Muslims the perception, real or imagined, that he does not cater to their concerns. End Comment.

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"Voice of the Tigers"  
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11. (SBU) The LTTE's "Voice of the Tigers" clandestine radio service is said to want to obtain a FM frequency from the Sri Lankan government. The LTTE reportedly made this request to GSL officials during recent mid-level meetings in Kilinochchi, the LTTE's headquarters in the north. Confirming that it had heard of the LTTE's interest in obtaining a frequency, the government's Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (TRC) has told us that the Tigers have not filed an official application as of yet. The TRC says the request lies with the Peace Secretariat.

12. (C) In making the request, the Tigers are apparently looking for countrywide radio coverage. At this time, the Voice of the Tigers can only be tuned in on limited FM and short-wave radio frequencies in northern and eastern Sri Lanka, and only at night. (Note: The FM frequency is between 94.1 and 96; the short-wave frequency is on 41 meter bands.) The Tigers presumably want all-island coverage in order to reach out to Tamils in Colombo and central Sri Lanka (unless they also go in for English or Sinhala services, in addition to their Tamil-language broadcasts).

13. (C) Comment: The Voice of the Tigers has broadcast some pretty bloodcurdling stuff in the past, including salutes to the LTTE's many terrorist acts. The fact that the Tigers apparently feel comfortable approaching the GSL regarding an expansion of services -- and that the government seems to be considering the request -- is a solid indication of how far the peace process has caught on. It is not clear how popular Tiger radio might be if it is ever given wide exposure. Renditions of LTTE "patriotic" music and replays of turgid speeches by V. Prabhakaran, the group's leader, would probably only have a limited appeal in the south, to put it mildly. End Comment.

14. (U) Minimize considered.

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